

Article

Improving Oral Skills through Readers Theatre: A Study of Views of Japanese EFL Learners

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Readers Theatre (RT) is an example of a story dramatization where readers first read a literary text and then write a drama script to portray characters from the text they have read. To portray a character, readers strive for voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation and projection. Readers Theatre was implemented in a class of EFL learners enrolled in the International Study and Regional Department in the University of Niigata Prefecture. This study was designed to investigate the attitudes of Japanese EFL learners towards the use of Reader Theatre as a way to enhance their English oral skills. The data for this research were collected through both quantitative and qualitative means. The quantitative data was aimed at investigating the attitudes of students towards the RT activity while the qualitative data were sought to examine students' perceptions as English language learners in the RT activity. The findings from this study show that RT enhanced the English skills of Japanese EFL learners as they learned to use English in a real communicative context. Readers Theatre also boosted the confidence of Japanese EFL learners in their spoken English as they experimented with their voices by varying the pitch and volume to portray the characters in their scripts.

Key words: Readers Theatre, oral English

1. Introduction

Adams (2003) defines Readers Theatre (RT) as a presentational performance with the purpose to entertain, instruct and persuade. It allows students to take virtually any piece of literature, analyse it and adapt it into a script. The script can then be performed with a minimum of preparation, props or scenery. Compared to conventional theatre

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where body and facial expressions are used, RT emphasized mainly on oral expressions to present a piece of literature. It involves learners in understanding their world, creating their own scripts, reading aloud, performing with a purpose, and bringing enjoyment to both themselves and their audiences. Sloyer (1982) states that RT can be implemented in the following stages: Readers first read a story, and then make selective and analytical choices in transforming the story into a script through social negotiations. They then formulate, practise and refine their interpretations, and finally perform for an audience, reading aloud from hand-held scripts.

According to Hill, (1990, p13), in creating RT scripts, learners increase their knowledge of language structure (vocabulary, syntax and meaning), language use (forms and functions of language use) and their metalinguistic awareness (the ability to talk about language). Berlinger, (2000, p1) recognising the benefits of scripted dialogues in encouraging English expressions, states that scripts have long been employed in EFL instruction because they permit learners to actively acquire the vocabulary, idioms, grammar and syntax of English speech. As they involve all aspects of language, scripts that are rehearsed in class can offer EFL learners a dynamic encounter that comes closest to real communication.

While RT has been used in the Western educational contexts, there is little research to address both its theoretical and pedagogical impact particularly in the Japanese EFL classroom. There is a strong possibility that RT might enable Japanese EFL learners to overcome their psychological fear in mastering English as the group aspect of RT puts Japanese EFL learner's in a protected rehearsal environment and raise their self esteem as they perform before an appreciative classroom audience (Adams, 2003). RT would enable Japanese EFL learners to strengthen their English vocabulary and increase their fluency in spoken English through expressive oral reading skills. Since the writing of scripts involves all aspects of language, RT should enable Japanese EFL learners to acquire English in a real communicative context.

2. Theoretical Background: The Pedagogical Value of Drama in Foreign Language Learning

One of the main concerns in foreign language learning is how to provide students with “real-life” language experience. There is a wealth of literature that documents the

pedagogical values of drama in EFL learning. Kao and O'Neill (1981) conducted a study to investigate the effects of drama activities on Taiwanese EFL learners. Their study showed that drama activities provide a lively and enjoyable learning environment for EFL students. Stern's study (1981) on the effect of drama on speech communication also revealed that drama activities can help improve EFL learners in communicative competence in areas such as heightened self-esteem, motivation, spontaneity, increased capacity for empathy and lowered sensitivity to rejection. In addition, Stern's study showed that participation in drama activities cause learners to feel less embarrassed and increased their ability to express in English intonation. Wilkinson (1988, p12) suggests that experiential drama aid language development such as enhancing the use of language for a wide variety of purposes, providing more frequent opportunity for otherwise rarely used expressed language, and helping EFL learners to use language as a powerful tool for self-expression.

Jordan and Harrell (2000) recognise RT as an effective drama activity for providing authentic speech practice especially in teaching reading fluency (rate, accuracy, phrasing, pitch, stress and expressiveness) as well as increasing comprehension for emergent readers. They observe that learners can learn a language more effectively when the language used in a text is real and relevant to them, and they can exercise a choice in the usage of the language. Hill (1990) observes that it is easy to master a language when the language is functional and used in the appropriate context with the learner exercising a choice in usage of the language. As learners negotiate on a script, they learn to use linguistic structures and features of spoken text such as pause and emphasis and adjust their own speaking and listening to the demands of different situations. Rosen and Koziol, Jr (1990) examine the relationship of drama activities to the improvement of oral communication skills, knowledge, comprehension, and attitudes. Their study showed that drama had a great influence on oral communication skills. Dougill (1987, p22) explains that drama scripts are of particular value to language learning because in contrast to the atomistic approach adopted in the conventional classroom teaching, scripts provide a rich source of comprehensible input in language that is natural and spoken. In addition, scripts also offer psychological security to the learner.

However, not all scholars agree to the use of drama in foreign language teaching. Kao

(1994) states that not all students display favourable attitudes towards drama as a means of learning a foreign language. Some students may hold a sceptical view of drama and consider drama activities as “party time.” In particular, students with low self-esteem or poor language proficiency levels might become discouraged by the progress made by their active and confident peers. Wagner (1998) states that although drama has been instrumental in expanding the range of registers and styles among language students, new studies are necessary to describe more fully the structure of drama teaching to determine which teacher strategies and interactions are critical to language development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

RT was introduced to Japanese EFL learners enrolled in an English programme in the University of Niigata Prefecture (UNP), a pioneer university located in Niigata Prefecture facing the Sea of Japan. The English Program at the University of Niigata Prefecture aims to develop students' skills in *Academic Communicative English*. The RT activity was conducted with two classes of First-year students enrolled in a Core English Class and one class of First-year students enrolled in a Speaking Class. The Core English class consisted of twenty students while the Speaking Class consisted of forty students. The average age of students was 18-20, and their average TOEFL score was about 400-450. The data for this study was obtained through a survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The first part of the survey questionnaire was designed to investigate students' feedback to the RT activity while the second part of the survey was aimed at eliciting students' views on the impact of the RT activity on their English oral skills. In addition, the teacher's observations were also used to triangulate the data from the survey questionnaire. Throughout the RT activity, the teacher jotted down notes and made detailed fieldnotes on students' learning behaviours.

3.2. Classroom procedures

The RT activity was implemented in the following stages and a description for each stage is as follows:

Stage	Activity/Task	Time Taken
One : Introducing the story	Teacher selects a scene (see Appendix 2) from a story in a graded reader. Teacher conducts a pre-reading activity (questioning, explaining the vocabulary etc) to familiarise students with the story.	20 minutes
Two: Writing the script	Teacher provides a scenario (see Appendix 3) for the script writing. Students form groups and write a script based on a given scenario given by the teacher. See Sample script by student (Appendix 4).	30 minutes
Three : Rehearsing the script	Teacher checks the script and students rehearse the script after approval by the teacher.	30 minutes
Four : Performing the script	Students perform the script in front of the class. A rubric for Readers Theatre is used to assess students' performance (see Appendix 5).	10minutes
Five: Reviewing the performance	Teacher plays back the recording and encourages students to comment on their peers' performance.	10 minutes

3.3. Data Analysis

The first part of the survey questions was designed to explicitly elicit students' opinions on the RT activity (see Appendix 1). The second part of the survey was designed to examine whether RT has any effect on the learning of oral English among the Japanese EFL learners. The theoretical framework for the qualitative analysis is based on the suggestions by Miles and Huberman (1994) which involve three concurrent stages of data analysis:

- (a) editing, segmenting and summarizing of data
- (b) organizing and assembling of data
- (c) coding and memoing.

Students' comments on the RT activity were analysed to see the extent RT create an impact on students' learning of English. Students' attitudes towards the learning of English were first analysed on an individual basis and each participant's salient positive attitudes towards RT were extracted and displayed. The data were then analysed through my interpretation and knowledge within the context of EFL learning.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results for Part 1 of the Survey Questionnaire

As mentioned earlier, the first part of the survey questionnaire was aimed at examining students' feedback to the RT activity. Eighty students participated in this activity. The results are tabulated in percentages (see Table 1).

Table 1: Students' feedback to the RT lesson

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1. The English lesson was more interesting when we act out the script	0%	5%	15%	80%
2. Acting out the script is a good way of learning spoken English	0%	5%	12%	83%
3. I will feel more confident about spoken English through this lesson	0%	8%	12%	80 %
4. Script writing is a difficult way of learning English	2%	83%	3%	12 %
5. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing the script	0%	7%	4 %	89%
6. I am not confident of using English through script writing	2%	5%	24%	69%
7. After watching my friends perform, I want to improve my spoken English	0%	2%	5%	93%

The results show that in general, a majority of students display positive attitudes towards the use of drama as an innovative approach to learning English. A majority of students indicated that they have not been exposed to the RT activity when the teacher introduced it in class. However, they were keen to participate in the RT activity. About 89% of students indicated that they enjoyed writing and performing the script with their friends (see Statement 5). Students also agreed that the English lesson was more interesting when they acted out the script (Statement 1). It can be observed that students participated actively during the lesson because of the theatrical elements in RT which encourages interaction of mind and emotions within individual student and also within other cast members in the group (Adams: 2003). In addition, a majority of students felt that RT is an effective way for them to master spoken English (Statement 2). This could be due to the fact that RT provides opportunities for students not only to negotiate the script in English but also allows them to develop natural rhythmic and

intonational patterns in English through the use of the voice elements to express the characters in the script.

4.2. Results from Part 2 of the survey questionnaire

The second part of the survey questionnaires, was designed to investigate the attitudes of Japanese EFL learners towards RT as a way to improve their oral English. To prevent any inbuilt attitudes on the use of drama in language learning, students were merely instructed to comment freely on the activity. They could write their comments either in Japanese or English. A total of sixty-nine students completed the second part of the survey questionnaire. A total of forty-five individual statements on the learning of spoken English were elicited. Several common positive attitudes on the learning of oral English were recorded through the RT activity (see Table 2).

Table 2: Students' Attitudes towards the use of Readers Theatre to improve oral English

	Statements by students
<i>The use of RT to improve oral English</i>	<i>More opportunity to communicate with other learners in English</i>
	<i>Improve English pronunciation through rehearsing the script several times</i>
	<i>Improve overall spoken English skills as a result of the RT activity</i>
	<i>Motivated to become good English speakers after watching the RT performance</i>
	<i>Examine own spoken English after listening to the script performance</i>
	<i>Good way to increase fluency in speaking</i>
	<i>Learn English phrases and words for conversation</i>

The analysis of the second part of the survey questionnaire indicated that in general, Japanese EFL learners responded positively to the RT activity as a way to improve their oral English. A majority of the students felt the RT activity provides an immediate motivation for them to improve their spoken English skills since they must master their parts well in order to perform for an audience. Such immediacy in foreign language study is particularly important for the Japanese EFL learners where their homogenous linguistic environment provide very little opportunities for them to use English in a real communicative context. As a result, students are often discouraged by their slow progress in spoken English. The students reported that the RT activity provided them

the opportunity to use words and expression that is authentic and relevant to their daily contexts (Berlinger, 2000). The rehearsal of the script before the actual performance also provides learners constant learning reinforcement of vocabulary and sentence constructions. This allows them to transfer their procedural knowledge of English into automated knowledge. However, with RT, the group collaborative aspects allow students to practise their oral English in a protected rehearsal environment (Adams, 2003). RT requires group members' cooperation or collaboration from the first phase of reading the selected material for analysis to the last phase of actual performance. Through the RT activity, learning occurs in a social context with meaning negotiated in a team setting.

4.3. Classroom Observation by the teacher

Although it was observed that several EFL learners remained passive and inhibited during the script negotiation, in general, RT generated students' interests in using English to engage in oral discussions. In the normal daily English lesson, a majority of EFL learners tend to adopt a passive stance during group discussions due to a lack of confidence in English. However, a lot of discussions in English were observed during the RT activity as individual students were keen to express their own views on the script. Through RT, students were able to communicate their views in English to explore roles, ideas and characters as they worked on the script-writing task. In the process, they learnt to manipulate language in order to portray different characters and situations. The negotiation of meaning allowed students to practise different aspects of the spoken target language (vocabulary, grammar, syntax etc) as much as possible. In addition, students' fluency in speaking was enhanced through the negotiations of script. Also, as learners perform before an appreciative classroom audience, they learn to gain confidence in their spoken English and their self-images as English speakers increase tremendously. The class became was lively and enjoyable as students rehearsed and performed the scripts for other students.

5. Conclusion

To recapitulate, the objective of the research is to examine the perceptions of Japanese EFL learners towards the use of Readers Theatre to improve their communicative English skills. The results of the survey questionnaire and the classroom observation by the teacher indicated that a majority of Japanese EFL students had positive response

to using RT as a means to improve their overall communicative English. Compared to the routine class lesson, a tremendous amount of natural English was generated during the RT activity as students made multiple negotiations in English to decide what lines to keep, where to edit and revise, and how lines should be said while working on the script. As students negotiated on their script, they began to understand the different language functions such as asking and answering questions, solving problems, expressing their opinions, arguing and persuading (Kao, 1994). They also learnt to experiment with English vocabulary, register and speech patterns as they took on different roles (Wager, 1998). In the process of script negotiation, students were also challenged to use language in new and creative ways. As students collaborated to produce a script, they also took ownership of their own learning and were intrinsically involved in developing authentic dialogue to ensure that a script is produced. RT provides richness and energy in the classroom because students are experientially involved in performing a piece of literature they have read. It is also energising for the teacher to watch students read, interpret and perform the script and became holistically involved in the process of deep learning.

However, there can be limitations to using RT in the Japanese EFL classroom, particularly if students have no familiarity with theatre as a genre. As mentioned earlier, some degrees of initial inhibitions were encountered among several students in a group during the RT activity. Another limitation is that there is a lack of native English speakers within Japanese educational institutions to provide model sounds for Japanese EFL learners to emulate (Asano, 2005). In addition, there are not many Japanese EFL learners with native-like English fluency to provide good “near peer role model” within the classroom (Murphey and Arao :2001). The presence of a community of “near peer role model” is important to convince other Japanese EFL learners that it is possible to speak good English without the native-English accent with sufficient time and practice. However, despite these limitations, RT has the potential to become an innovative teaching approach to motivate Japanese EFL learners to improve their communicative abilities in English. As Japanese EFL learners focus on preparing for a performance, all elements of language skills are reinforced in a naturalistic language environment. The urgency to put on a good show intensifies concentration of a text and this immediacy is especially helpful in enabling learners to cultivate their interests in the learning of a foreign language (Adams, 2003).

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Appendix 1 Survey questionnaire on Readers Theatre

Part 1: Circle the appropriate statement

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1. The English lesson was more interesting when we act out the script				
2. Acting out the script is a good way of learning spoken English				
3. I will feel more confident about spoken English through this lesson				
4. Script writing is a difficult way of learning English				
5. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing the script				
6. I am not confident of using English through script writing				
7. After watching my friends perform, I want to improve my spoken English				

Part 2: Please write in English or Japanese any other comments about the activity

Thank you for your feedback!

Appendix 2: Introducing the story: The Little Mermaid

“What do you want?” the old woman said. “You want to have two feet and live on the land? You want the prince to love you and give you a soul? I can help you but you will be very unhappy. Here’s a magic drink. Take it to the land, then drink it. You will have feet, but they will hurt. Do you understand? Do you really want to be a land person? You can never be a mermaid again.”

“I do want to be a land person,” the mermaid answered. She wanted her prince and she wanted a soul.

(Penguin Graded Reader: Tales from Hans Andersen, page 18)

Appendix 3 : Scenario for Script Writing

Imagine you are the little mermaid. You really want to have the magic drink so that you can be a human. Write a script to show how you would persuade the old woman to give you the magic drink. If you were the old woman, what would you say to the little mermaid to stop her from taking the magic drink?

Appendix 4: A sample script by students

The Little Mermaid

M: Little Mermaid

O: Old Woman

N: Narrator

N: Do you know that every country in the world has its own stories? They are folklore that people tell each other. Many of the stories are about animals. And sometimes the animals speak and act just as we do. Sometimes they show us some practical ideas about life. This kind of story is called a fable. Today, our Readers Theatre will share a scene from a fable, 'The Little Mermaid.'

M: Hello, I want you to help me.

O: What's your problem?

M: Please give me human legs, please.

O: I can give you human legs, but it will hurt you and furthermore, you won't be able to speak anything when you get human legs. In addition, you won't be a mermaid again.

M: I don't mind about it. I just want to be a human and I want the prince to love me.

O: If you become a human, there is no guarantee that he will love you. If you are not loved by him, you will die and become bubble of the sea. Then your parents, grandmother and sisters will feel very sad. With these risks, do you still want human legs?

M: Yes, I do. Whatever will happen to me, I will never regret what I did.

O: Okay, Then there is a magic drink. When you reach the land, drink it and you will get human legs. But remember that your legs will hurt and you won't be able to speak anything.

M: I understand. Thank you so much.

Appendix 5 : Rubric for evaluating students' performance

AREA	1	2	3	4
Knowledge	Students do not interpret the story appropriately	Interprets the story appropriately.	Interprets the story imaginatively and appropriately.	Interprets the story creatively and with depth.
Presentation	Students do not seem to be aware of what they should be doing at all.	Students do not appear confident about what they are doing.	Students appear to be fairly prepared.	Group is well prepared.
Voice	Hard to understand.	Not so well articulated.	Well articulated. Easy to understand.	Entire skit was clear, concise, and well articulated.
Projection	Used no expression or inappropriate expression.	Used some expression in their voices.	Used expression in their voices, loud and soft.	Great expression in their voices, loud and soft.
Overall Performance	No enthusiasm	Some enthusiasm	Very enthusiastic	Great Enthusiasm

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